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ABSTRACT

"Issues in Administering Rural Schools" is a graduate level course for prospective school administrators at St. Cloud State University (Minnesota). The course is available at several remote sites through two-way interactive television. Because a large proportion of schools in Minnesota and the nation are rural, administering rural schools is worthy of study by students of school administration whether or not they plan to be rural educators. The course focuses on: (1) typology and characteristics of rural schools; (2) the geographic, economic, social, and political contexts in which rural education occurs; (3) administrative tasks and functions in rural school districts; (4) opportunities and problems associated with providing leadership in rural school settings; and (5) sources of information on rural education. Course organization entails weekly required readings, oral presentations, statistical comparisons of school districts, and guest speakers. The term project is a cooperative research project, such as one in which students collected data from practicing superintendents on personal and professional issues in rural school administration. This paper includes interview questions and student responses, learner outcomes reported by students and organized by course objective, and student comments on the course. (SV)

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Rural School Administrators for a New Age

A Presentation for the
Annual Conference
National Rural Education Association
Jackson, Mississippi
October 13, 1991

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Rural School Administrators for a New Age

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St. Cloud, Minnesota

"Issues in Administering Rural Schools" is a graduate level course taught at St. Cloud State University for prospective school administrators. St. Cloud State is one of seven institutions in the Minnesota State University System. It is situated in St. Cloud, a city of about 50,000 population in central Minnesota, 70 miles from Minneapolis and St. Paul. The University service area stretches north from the Twin Cities to Bemidji, east and west to the state boundaries. The Center for Educational Administration and Leadership at St. Cloud State, in which I am a professor and in which this course was developed and taught, offers educational administration programs at the Master's and Specialist levels. Students who complete the programs are eligible for licensure as elementary or secondary principals, community education directors, and superintendents. The Center's current enrollment includes approximately 120 students enrolled in the Master's program and 40 students enrolled in the Specialist or Sixth-year program. Most of

them are part-time students who are full-time employees in school districts in the St. Cloud State service area. Most of the classes offered by the Center are evening classes, held one night a week for three hours, on a quarter schedule of 10 or 11 weeks. Although there are a number of students from the metropolitan areas and small cities, many of the students are educators in small, rural districts. Because a large number of schools/school districts in the state and in the nation are considered rural-- that is, located in rural areas-- administering rural schools is worthy of study by students of school administration whether or not they plan to be rural educators. Students in the course are expected to gain a perspective on the geographic, economic, social, and political contexts in which rural education occurs.

Course objectives

The course was designed to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Examine educational administration at the school and district level as it pertains to rural education.
2. Understand the opportunities and problems associated with providing leadership in rural school settings.
3. Encourage and support students in collecting and analyzing data regarding the administration of rural schools.
4. Acquaint students with a variety of information sources pertaining to rural education.
5. Motivate students toward a continuing interest in rural education.

Major topics and activities

To accomplish the course objectives, readings and activities were organized around the following major topics:

Typology and Characteristics of Rural Schools
Context for Rural Education, Part 1--Geographic, Social
Context for Rural Education, Part 2--Economic, Political, Educational
Policy, Governance and Legal Aspects---Federal, State, Local
Administrative Tasks and Functions---Financial Resources
Administrative Tasks and Functions---Human Resources
Administrative Tasks and Functions---Curriculum and Instruction
Administrative Tasks and Functions--Facilities, Transportation and Other Operations
Leadership and School Improvement
Leadership for Rural Schools---Achievements and Challenges

Required readings were selected from appropriate books and journals as well as documents and publications including Rural Education: A Changing Landscape; Redesigning Rural Education: Ideas for Action; and Leadership for Rural Schools. In addition to the weekly reading assignments, each student selected one major topic on rural schools for oral presentation to the class. Using a Department of Education document "Minnesota School Profiles", each student prepared and presented a comparison of three school districts on statistical data such as enrollment; per cent of local, state, and federal revenues; and tax capacity. Occasional out-of-class quizzes gave students an opportunity to reflect on specific aspects of the readings and to respond to current school policy issues. Instructional strategies included individual presentations, large and small group

discussions, and interactions with practicing educators. Five guest speakers were selected for their expertise on various aspects of rural education and administration. The presenters and their topics were:

Dr. Ron Bratlie, Superintendent, Audubon-Lake Park Schools
"The Shared Superintendency in Rural Schools"

Dr. Duane Lund, Former Superintendent, Staples Schools
"Improving the Schools. . .Revisited"

Lou Czarnowski, Principal, Albany Elementary School
Bill Hakes, Principal, Avon and Farming Elementary Schools
"The Principal as Instructional Leader in Rural Schools"

Lowell Schwalbe, Superintendent, Karlstad Public Schools
"The Cooperating Administrator"

Dr. Anthony Gilberti, Professor, St. Cloud State University
"Sustainable Rural Community Development"

Cooperative Research Project

The term project was a cooperative research project which gave students an opportunity to collect data from practicing superintendents on several personal and professional topics which illustrate some of the issues in administering schools in rural settings. Five questions were selected by the instructor from an article which appeared in the November 1990 issue of The School Administrator; one question* was crafted by the class. Each student in the class selected a superintendent in a school district with an enrollment of less than 1000 students, located 25 miles or more from a population center of 50,000 or more. The student responsibilities

included initiating the request for an interview, setting the date and time, sending an advance copy of the questions, typing the results for class presentation, and sending a copy of the individual's responses and letter of appreciation. The results of all interviews were organized by the instructor so that all responses to a specific question were together. Copies of the original interview data and the compiled responses were given to each student. They were instructed to choose two numbers between one and six. These numbers indicated the two interview questions for which the student was to summarize all responses in an out-of-class assignment. As part of the final examination, students wrote at least two conclusions that could be drawn from the responses they had summarized. The interview questions and examples of the conclusions drawn by students are as follows:

1. What single quality do you consider to be most important for success as a rural superintendent?
   - -the rural superintendent needs to be a generalist, able to address a wide range of issues and problems
   - -the rural superintendent must have the ability to get along with people, communication skills, and versatility

2. What role as superintendent are you able to play in curriculum development?
   - -role is to become a facilitator of curriculum change by coordinating the things that are necessary for principals and teachers to develop the curriculum
   - -curriculum is a priority, with some personally involving themselves in the actual development while others preferred to establish a climate and work through others

3. What's the most unlikely task you've handled as a superintendent?
   - -nothing should be considered unlikely because the role of the rural district superintendent is so wide and varied
   - -all the training we have will never prepare us for everything we will have to deal with
   - -the superintendent is responsible for handling all perceived problems regardless of the time of day or night

4. What do you consider the most significant challenge you face as a rural superintendent--other than attracting adequate state and local funding?
   - -the need for educational planning
   - -ability to keep high quality teachers
   - -superintendent as a visionary
   - -keeping the school and community working together

*5. What are you doing to bring your graduates back to your community?
   - -some frustration regarding a felt need to do something to attract graduates back to the community and the lack of knowledge of what can be done
   - -the superintendents need expert help in finding ways to help revitalize their communities
   - -the school's role is to prepare youth to do better than their parents did and to find employment outside the rural community
   - -difference of opinion regarding the appropriate role of the school in community development, ranging from the need for active involvement in community development to viewing it as an inappropriate school role

6. What enduring quality of a rural superintendency would keep you in such a setting?
    - -the rural culture and ethic has kept superintendents in the rural schools for most of their careers
    - -specifically commented about lack of bureaucracy and being able to know people on a personal basis
    - -prefer the quality of life offered by a rural setting; many are originally from rural areas and welcome the return to the value system they knew as children

Learner outcomes as reported by students

In the final examination, students were asked to identify learner outcomes (i.e., a knowledge, skill, or affect developed as a result of active participation in a planned learning experience) which had occurred because of their enrollment in the course "Issues in Administering Rural Schools". Course objectives and examples of outcomes as reported by students are as follows:

1. Examine educational administration at the school and district level as it pertains to rural education
    - -acquired a knowledge of the economies and diseconomies of consolidation; consolidation may be the correct solution for some rural schools, yet it is not always the solution
    - -acquired an awareness and knowledge of issues which impact the administration of rural education: how educational policy has shaped rural schools through consolidation trends, teacher certification requirements, and financial funding formulas
    - -acquired awareness of the importance of community social and economic factors in rural schools
    - -how small size and isolation impact the organization and administration of rural schools
    - -with little political clout, rural districts need to expand rural interest groups

2. Understand the opportunities and problems associated with providing leadership in rural school settings.
    - -the leader by necessity becomes more involved directly in many aspects of the educational process, therefore is in a better position to effect positive change
    - -careful, valid research is lacking in nearly all phases of rural education
    - -reformers ignore the cultural diversity and locality of rural areas, pretend that they are unimportant in school reform concentrating on structural reform only
    - -a challenging problem is accepting a mandated curriculum which is a carbon copy of a larger school system's
    - -need for colleges and universities to develop training programs specifically for rural schools

3. Encourage and support students in collecting and analyzing data regarding the administration of rural schools.
    - -developed interviewing skills and techniques
    - -received opportunity to see how the concerns of the superintendents were similar
    - -class project data provided insights into how rural superintendents function and view their roles as educational leaders
    - -class research project provided the opportunity to network with some fine educational leaders
    - -gained a better understanding of the differences between schools from the school district profiles research; it is apparent that rural school districts are as different from each other as they are from urban and metro districts

4. Acquaint students with a variety of information sources pertaining to rural education.
    - -emphasis on the need to stay in touch with rural values and issues through publications directed toward rural life
    - -variety of sources used in class, e.g., articles, ERIC, library, books, journals and newspapers,

administrators who visited the class and who were interviewed, districts represented by the class members

5. Motivate students toward a continuing interest in rural education
   - -realize similarities of rural school and private schools
   - -be challenged to make a difference even in a small school
   - -realize possibilities as illustrated by Superintendent Lund and his Staples experience
   - -because I enjoy living in a rural community, I am willing to undertake the challenges presented to a rural school administrator

Rural School Administrators for a New Age

Appreciation is expressed and recognition is given to the eight students who participated intensively and enthusiastically in all aspects of the course "Issues in Administering Rural Schools" in Winter quarter 1991. Will they be the "rural school administrators for a new age"? They are looking forward to the challenge as several excerpts from their comments reveal:

". . .I am a product of rural schools and have taught in metro schools, large community schools and small rural schools. I had never taken time to reflect on their differences or on whether or not I would prefer to go back to a metro school. This course has not only helped me to understand more of the significant differences between large and small schools, but also to understand and evaluate my own career choices. I much prefer rural schools and plan to stay in rural schools as an administrator. This course has also helped me to re-evaluate my opinions on consolidation and to view the issue a little more critically. I am much more enthusiastic about rural education as a result of our readings and discussions in this course and will continue to support local control and decisionmaking over state mandates and the one-best-system approach to education. . ."

". . .my desire to become a rural school administrator was greatly enhanced by this course. The small school research to which we were exposed reinforced my understanding of the unique

strengths and challenges of rural education. The description of rural community support and citizen involvement stimulated me to seek out such an educational environment. It became quite apparent that there is so much opportunity to become a catalytic change agent within a rural school. . ."

". . .at first I was not a strong supporter of small rural school districts. By taking this class I see that rural schools do have much to offer. We need to do some things to help these schools help themselves. We need to give small schools more attention. We need to find alternatives to consolidation and reorganization just because it is the thing to do. . ."

Current status of the course

As noted, there were eight students in the course when it was first offered last winter. The course is currently being taught through two-way interactive television, with fourteen students attending class in the campus studio and four students at two remote sites. The objectives and texts have been revised to accommodate current issues; assignments have been changed somewhat to accommodate the class size and location of participants. Copies of the current course syllabus are available. As a result of developing and teaching this class, several questions have emerged. Among them are the following:

*What are the essential concepts that should be included in a course in rural school administration?
*Should a course in rural school administration be an elective or a requirement in university programs where a majority of the graduates will most likely be employed in rural schools?
*What are appropriate research projects in rural school administration that students can accomplish during a ten or eleven week quarter?

And, finally, are there others attending this conference who are interested in this topic and who will collaborate in its further development?